
Other Destinies, Other Plots

An Introduction to Indian Novels

To begin to write about something called "the American Indian novel" is to enter a slippery and uncertain terrain. Take one step into this region and we are confronted with difficult questions of authority and ethnicity: What is an Indian? Must one be one-sixteenth Osage, one-eighth Cherokee, one-quarter Blackfoot, or full-blood Sioux to be Indian? Must one be raised in a traditional "Indian" culture or speak a native language or be on a tribal roll? To identify as Indian—or mixedblood—and to write about that identity is to confront such questions. The fact that, as D. H. Lawrence clearly recognized, at the heart of America's history of Indian hating is an unmistakable yearning to *be* Indian—romantically and from a distance made hazy through fear and guilt—compounds the complexity. The fact that so many people throughout the world have a strangely concrete sense of what a "real" Indian should *be* adds still greater stress to the puzzle; woe to him or her who identifies as Indian or mixedblood but does not bear a recognizably "Indian" name or physiognomy or life-style, as the cases of the Lumbee or Mashpee or the innumerable mixedbloods in the United States testify. Discussing the controversial 1976 land claim of the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribal Council, James Clifford has pointed out that "in court they were not helped by the fact that few of them looked strongly 'Indian.' Some of them could pass for black, others for white." With only some simplification, Karen I. Blu argues:

For Whites, blood is a substance that can be either racially pure or racially polluted. Black blood pollutes White blood absolutely, so that, in the logical extreme, one drop of Black blood makes an otherwise

White man black. . . . White ideas about "Indian blood" are less formalized and clear-cut. . . . It may take only one drop of Black blood to make a person a Negro, but it takes a lot of Indian blood to make a person a "real" Indian.¹

Identity for Native Americans is made more complex yet by the fact that the American Indian in the world consciousness is a treasured invention, a gothic artifact evoked like the "powwows" in Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" out of the dark reaches of the continent to replace the actual native, who, painfully problematic in real life, is supposed to have long since vanished. Even individuals seemingly well informed about American Indian literature can exhibit this tendency to relegate "real" Indians to an absolute past, as when we see a writer for the *New York Times*, reviewing James Welch's *Fools Crow*, stating in the simple past tense that "Indians *applied* revelations from the world beyond to the workings of this one, for they *believed* that by tapping into the spiritual they could gain power over everyday occurrences." Such statements leave no room for the Indian today who still applies such revelations and believes in the compelling force of the spiritual.² In fact, the Indian in today's world consciousness is a product of literature, history, and art, and a product that, as an invention, often bears little resemblance to actual, living Native American people.

It is at this disjuncture between myth and reality that American Indian novelists most often take aim, and out of which the material of their art most often arises. "I'm still educating an audience," the Chippewa writer Gerald Vizenor has explained. "For example, about Indian identity I have a revolutionary fervor. The hardest part of it is I believe we're all invented as Indians. . . . The inventions have become disguises. . . . This occurs in invented Indians because we're invented and we're invented from traditional static standards and we are stuck in coins and words like artifacts." Vizenor would go still further, agreeing with Paul Watzlawick that what is considered the real world "is an invention whose inventor is unaware of his act of invention . . . the invention then becomes the basis of his world view and actions."³

For American Indians, the problem of identity comprehends centuries of colonial and postcolonial displacement, often brutally enforced peripherality, cultural denigration—including especially a harsh privileging of English over tribal languages—and systematic oppression by the monocentric "westerling" impulse in America. It comprehends the fact that on reservations today, more than 90

percent of Native American children up for adoption are adopted into non-Indian families, an institutionalized "mainstreaming" of Indian children into Euramerica that results in widespread loss of cultural identity as well as a feeling by Indian people that their children are being systematically stolen away.⁴ The recovering or rearticulation of an identity, a process dependent upon a rediscovered sense of place as well as community, becomes in the face of such obstacles a truly enormous undertaking.⁵ This attempt is at the center of American Indian fiction.

For Vizenor, who celebrates with "agonistic" humor his own mixed blood, or what he refers to as "torsion in the blood" fiction becomes a process of deconstructing the verbal artifacts of Indian—or mixedblood—identity. For other writers who identify as Native American, the novel represents a process of reconstruction, of self-discovery and cultural recovery. In Laguna author Paula Gunn Allen's term, it is a *re-membering* or putting together of identity. What is put together is rich and complex, like Spiderwoman's wondrous web of creation that appears again and again in American Indian writing, particularly in works by Native American women. For the contemporary Indian novelist—in every case a mixedblood who must come to terms in one form or another with peripherality as well as both European and Indian ethnicity—identity is the central issue and theme, and, as Clifford has suggested, ethnic identity is always "mixed, relational, and inventive." "We are what we imagine," N. Scott Momaday has written. According to Momaday, "An Indian is an idea which a given man has of himself." Writing of his mother's identification as Indian, Momaday says simply, "She imagined who she was."⁶

Whether, to borrow catchy phrases from Alain Robbe-Grillet's *jealousy*, the writer is "taking apart" in the deconstructionist mode of Vizenor or "taking a part" in the (more high modernist) fashion of an N. Scott Momaday, who carefully crafts an Indian identity through language, in their fiction American Indian novelists confront, inevitably and absorbingly, this question of identity. This issue of contextual identity is one virtually every contemporary Native American—mixedblood or fullblood—is aware of. Chippewa artist Sam English, whose paintings often feature traditionally costumed and confident Indians wearing sunglasses and seeming to challenge the viewer to attempt a cultural definition, has explained, "I'm trying to paint Indians who are making it in both worlds, guys who have jobs like everybody else in the country but

who go home at five and become traditional Indians again." Like Vizenor, English locates indices of Indian identity in humor: "Humor that's kept us all going during the bad times. A lot of people don't realize that, and I try to show it."⁷

To comprehend the extraordinary challenge faced by Indian authors and by those who would come to some kind of understanding of Indian fiction, it may help to turn to the ubiquitously useful Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin, who wrote:

Indeed, any concrete discourse (utterance) finds the object at which it was directed already as it were overlain with qualifications, open to dispute, charged with value, already enveloped in an obscuring mist—or, on the contrary, by the "light" of alien words that have already been spoken about it. It is entangled, shot through with shared thoughts, points of view, alien value judgments and accents. The word, directed toward its object, enters a dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment of alien words.⁸

For a Native American storyteller or writer working within an awareness of traditional, oral American Indian literatures and cultures, Bakhtin's contention that in the dialogic process context is crucial to understanding would seem self-evident. Within traditional Native American literatures, speaker and listener are coparticipants in the telling of a story.

Barre Toelken and Tacheeni Scott, discussing the storytelling of Yellowman, a "Navajo raconteur," have made this point effectively, writing that "the audience plays a central role in the narrative style; without an audience, his tales are almost entirely lacking in the special intonations, changes in speed, pacing, and dramatic pauses which are so prominent [in the 'told' story]." Arnold Krupat has further pointed out that "there simply were no Native American texts until whites decided to collaborate with Indians and make them."⁹ While Krupat's declaration omits such Native American "texts" as the traditional winter counts or calendars, it nonetheless underscores the complexity of the task confronting the novelist who would write as an Indian about Indian concerns. For the Indian author, writing within consciousness of the contextual background of a nonliterate culture, every word written in English represents a collaboration of sorts as well as a reorientation (conscious or unconscious) from the paradigmatic world of oral tradition to the syntagmatic reality of written language.¹⁰

Discussing literature written in English by "natives" under colonial pressures, Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, authors of *The Empire*

Writes Back, state: "The producers signify by the very fact of writing in the language of the dominant culture that they have temporarily or permanently entered a specific and privileged class endowed with the language, education, and leisure necessary to produce such works."¹¹ Contemporary American Indian writers have indeed most often permanently entered that class, possessing as they do a consistently high level of education (almost always at least one college degree) and mastery of English, a fact that certainly adds complexity to the overarching question of cultural identity.

Native American authors face constantly the dilemma of a privileged discourse already "charged with value" and "alien." The dilemma begins with the word *Indian*. Perhaps no other utterance in American language is so "enveloped in an obscuring mist," so "entangled, shot through with shared thoughts, points of view, alien value judgments and accents." In spite of its wide acceptance, even appropriation, by Native Americans, it should be borne in mind that the word *Indian* came into being on this continent simply as an utterance designed to impose a distinct "otherness" upon indigenous peoples. To be "Indian" was to be "not European."¹² Native cultures—their voices systematically silenced—had no part in the ongoing discourse that evolved over several centuries to define the utterance "Indian" within the language of the invaders. Although Native Americans have appropriated that term to make it serve their own, separate needs, the end result as non-Indians understand it is a signifier that comprehends Euramerican responses to the "New World" but has little to do with the native inhabitants of that world. When a character in Vizenor's *Bearheart* demands of Belladonna Darwin Winter-Catcher, "What does Indian mean?" the question cuts to the heart of the predicament illuminated and explored and, to varying degrees, resolved in works by contemporary Indian authors. By deconstructing the utterance, writers such as Vizenor are redefining American Indian identity, and they are doing so in the face of often stunning ignorance of American Indian cultures on the part of the rest of the world.

This ignorance ranges from such typical confusion as English historical novelist Antonia Fraser's succinct explanation that Pocahontas was "a member of the Sioux tribe, who were all about six feet tall," to Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin's ground-breaking 1989 study of postcolonial literatures that omits any mention at all of American Indian writing, though the authors do consider the Euramerican colonial and postcolonial experience. Similarly, in a re-

cently published article in which a teacher describes his praiseworthy attempts to introduce Navajo students—on the Navajo reservation—to “post colonial” literature, the author of the article stresses works from Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific but fails to mention literature actually written by American Indians such as Navajo poets Luci Tapahonso and Nia Francisco or the Pawnee-Otoe novelist and short fiction writer Anna Lee Walters, who is employed by Navajo Community College.¹³

The nature of the confrontation permeating Native American fiction is intensely political. “A particular language in a novel is always a particular way of viewing the world, one that strives for a social significance,” Bakhtin writes,¹⁴ and within the novels discussed in my study are to be found particularly “Indian” ways of viewing the world, worldviews that are almost always in direct conflict with the dominant *ideologemes* of Euramerica. Again and again in this fiction, this conflict is epitomized through conflicting discourses, through breakdowns in communication and understanding, failures in articulation. Confronted with the authoritative, privileged voice of European America, the Indian resorts to subversion or often falls silent. We see the former response most clearly in a work such as John Rollin Ridge’s *Joaquin Murieta*, in which this Cherokee mixedblood author thinly disguises his outrage in a story of Mexican-American conflict in California. The latter response is ubiquitous in these novels, in characters such as Archilde, who extends his hands in silence at the end of D’Arcy McNickle’s *The Surrounded*, or in Abel in N. Scott Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn*. These Native American mixedbloods approach the condition Fredric Jameson, following Jacques Lacan, has described as a schizophrenia characterized by a “breakdown in the signifying chain of meaning.”¹⁵

Conversely, confronted with the alien nonanthropocentric and ecologically oriented world-view of the Indian, the white culture shown in fiction by Native Americans relies more heavily upon privileged discourse to assert its dominance, like James Fenimore Cooper’s Natty Bumppo dismissing a Pawnee description of heaven with his own privileged, European version. Such privileging supports the contention that “language becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of ‘truth’, ‘order’, and ‘reality’ become established.” Elaine Jahner has described this epistemological crisis: “Translating what they [Native Americans] sensed into

terms that might communicate interculturally was impossible because such translation requires knowledge of two ways of knowing, but beyond that it requires that the issue itself make sense to the people to whom it is being addressed. Until the twentieth century, few European intellectuals radically questioned their own epistemological foundations.”¹⁶

Native American novelists confront the additional challenge of making themselves understood in a prose form quite foreign to traditional Native American discourse. Before their “corruption” into written English, American Indian texts were oral and communal. Primary to this transition is a fundamental shift in the conception of language as well as knowledge. The coercive power of language in Native American oral traditions—that ability to “bring into being” and thus radically enter into reality—intersects with what has been called “the development of historic consciousness” as a result of written language.¹⁷ With written literacy, language becomes descriptive/historic and begins to lose its unique power as creator of reality.

Just as significant is the fact that the concept of a single author for any given text, or of an individual who might conceive of herself or himself as the creative center and originating source of a story, or of the individual autobiography, would have made as little sense to pre-Columbian Native Americans as the notion of selling real estate.¹⁸ For the traditional storyteller, each story originates with and serves to define the people as a whole, the community. This fact, of course, does not preclude the essential adaptation and evolution of each story as it is told, for as Dennis Tedlock has explained in regard to the Zuni of New Mexico, “the storyteller-interpreter does not merely quote or paraphrase the text but may even improve upon it, describe a scene which it does not describe, or answer a question which it does not answer.” Tedlock goes on to explain: “For the Zuni storyteller-interpreter, the relationship between text and interpretation is a dialectical one: he or she both respects the text and revises it.”¹⁹ Traditional storytelling is a syncretic process, necessary to the adaptive, dynamic nature of American Indian cultures—that quality requisite for cultural survival. The ease and subtlety with which Indians incorporated European mythology into their own highly syncretic oral tradition has often been documented and commented upon. The brilliant and ideosyncratic anthropologist Jaime de Angulo provides the example of a Pit River/Klamath storyteller who says, “This here Jesus, he and his

wife Mary, and they had a little boy with them, they traveled all over the world, they made mountains and trees, they made trees, they made springs everywhere, *teeqaade toolol*. . . This here Jesus he was a great man; he was the best gambler in the whole United States!"²⁰

The emphasis in such storytelling falls nonetheless not upon the creative role of the storyteller but upon the communal nature of the stories, with the "outcome" of each story already being known to the audience.²¹ Within the oral tradition, literature is authorless, lacking what Michel Foucault, describing the modern concept of "author," has called "the principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning." John Bierhorst has commented upon the collective nature of traditional Indian literatures, explaining that "the Indian poet does not consider himself the originator of his material but merely the conveyor. . . . Indian poetry, then, is usually attributed not to an individual but to his culture." About the concept labeled "author," Foucault has written, "The coming into being of the notion of 'author' constitutes the privileged moment of *individualization* in the history of ideas, knowledge, literature, philosophy, and the sciences."²² The birth of the novel, as Ian Watt and others have shown, parallels and owes much to the new emphasis upon the individual in Western societies,²³ and it is perhaps worth noting that the modern novel was being created by Cervantes in Spain at the same time that Native Americans—belonging to radically diverse cultural groups speaking more than 250 distinct languages—were receiving their intense introduction to the Old World through colonialism. The privileging of the individual necessary for the conception of the modern novel (and for the conception of the American Myth) is a more radical departure for American Indian cultures than for the Western world as a whole, for Foucault's "moment of individualization" represents an experience forced harshly, and rather unsuccessfully, upon Native Americans. In this sense, while contemporary American Indian poets, regardless of their consciousness of influence, may imagine themselves part of an ancient oral tradition of singers or storytellers, the Native American novelist works in a medium for which no close Indian prototype exists. The novelist must therefore rely upon story and myth but graft the thematic and structural principles found therein upon the "foreign" (though infinitely flexible) and intensely egocentric genre of the written prose narrative, or novel.

Regardless of how effectively a novel may incorporate the cycli-

cal, ordered, ritual-centered, and paradigmatic world of traditional oral literatures, try as he or she may, the Native American novelist can never step back into the collective anonymity of the tribal storyteller. Ironically, for the novelist writing with a consciousness of responsibility as a member of a living Native American culture, this irreversible metamorphosis from oral, communal literature to the written commodity of published work may be an essential objectification. The form of the novel may thus represent a necessary "desacralization" of traditional materials, a transformation that allows sacred materials—from ritual and myth—to move into the secular world of decontextualized "art" and one that resembles the transformation of ceremonial dance by the highly choreographed American Indian Dance Theater. This transformation can be problematic, as the mixedblood Laguna Pueblo writer Paula Gunn Allen points out when she writes that "to use the oral tradition directly is to run afoul of native ethics." The risk, however, is one that many Indian authors appear ready to assume.²⁴

The transformation may be problematic in other ways as well, putting into particular focus the dilemma of identity and authenticity which, while common to inhabitants of the modern Western world, is particularly intense for Native Americans and, especially, mixedbloods. As writers such as Silko, Erdrich, Vizenor, Momaday, and virtually all contemporary authors identifying as "Indian" to one degree or another inscribe their authorial signatures to published works, they enter into what Foucault has termed the realm of the author as "ideological product," that "certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses." Native American writing represents an attempt to recover identity and authenticity by invoking and incorporating the world found within the oral tradition—the reality of myth and ceremony—an authorless "original" literature. Yet through the inscription of an authorial signature, the Indian writer places him- or herself in immediate tension with this communal, authorless, and identity-conferring source, at once highlighting the very questions of identity and authenticity the new literature attempts to resolve: "Who really spoke? Is it really he and not someone else? With what authenticity or originality?" One paradoxical result can be a sense, in writing by contemporary Indian authors, of the oral tradition as what Jacques Derrida has termed "the absent origin," a "sad, negative, nostalgic" response that contradicts a Nietzschean "joyous affirmation of freeplay." In every case, however, the Native

American novelist plays off of and moves beyond (and challenges the reader to likewise move beyond) this faint trace of "Rousseauist" ethnostalgia—most common to Euramerican treatments of Native American Indians—toward an affirmation of a syncretic, dynamic, adaptive identity in contemporary America.²⁵

In addition to the "foreign" genre of the individually authored, egocentric text (a concept often discounted, of course, in contemporary theory), the Native American writer, like almost all colonized people, must also function within an essentially appropriated language. For behind the modern Indian author's fluent mastery of English lies a centuries-old history of assimilation, not merely the painful, forced assimilation of a marginalized people into the cultural mainstream (the federal government's infamous and disastrous answer to the "Indian Problem"), but also the assimilation of "alien" discourse by an oppressed people. "The ideological becoming of a human being," according to Bakhtin, "is the process of selectively assimilating the words of others." The contemporary American Indian, and particularly the mixedblood, is the product of generations of such selective assimilation. "The tendency to assimilate others' discourse," Bakhtin writes, "takes on an even deeper and more basic significance in an individual's ideological becoming, in the most fundamental sense. Another's discourse performs here no longer as information, directions, rules, models and so forth—but strives rather to determine the very basis of our behavior; it performs here as *authoritative discourse*, and an *internally persuasive discourse*." Native Americans have had several centuries of experience with authoritative discourse, having had their native languages ruthlessly suppressed to the extent that punishment for speaking "Indian" represents a common denominator among Native Americans who have "gone to school" (often in boarding schools where the process of displacement was most rapid and intense). Indian writers have consistently recognized this inescapable struggle with language. Like Rocky in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* and Benally in N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, both victims of the American Dream, Native American writers repeatedly demonstrate to some degree this conflict between an authoritative "alien" discourse and an internally persuasive worldview articulated by traditional values. Like the school books Rocky believes wholeheartedly, the dominant language insists upon its authority and "demands that we acknowledge it, that we make it

our own; it binds us, quite independent of any power it might have to persuade us internally; we encounter it with its authority already fused to it." Language "indissolubly fused with its authority—with political power" is a central concern in the novels discussed in this study, a concern evidenced again and again in the themes of articulation and inarticulateness.²⁶

For Momaday, a lifelong quest for a fully realized Kiowa identity began precisely with language. Momaday has said:

I think of myself as an Indian because at one time in my life I suddenly realized that my father had grown up speaking a language that I didn't grow up speaking, that my forebears on his side had made a migration from Canada along with . . . Athapaskan peoples that I knew nothing about, and so I determined to find out something about these things and in the process I acquired an identity; and it is an Indian identity, as far as I am concerned.²⁷

Like his fellow Indian writers, Momaday discovered that the task before him was not simply to learn the lost language of his tribe but rather to appropriate, to tear free of its restricting authority, another language—English—and to make that language accessible to an Indian discourse. The task is herculean—sometimes, as McNickle seems to suggest in his two major novels, almost impossible—and it is, of course, immensely complicated by considerations of audience.

Traditionally, a storyteller's audience consisted of tribe or clan members who could be counted on to contribute a wealth of intimate knowledge to the telling of any story, to thus actively participate in the dynamics of the story's creation. Bakhtin explains: "Whatever kind it be, the behavioral utterance always joins the participants in the situation together as *co-participants* who know, understand, and evaluate the situation in like manner." Addressing Native American traditional literatures specifically, Dell Hymes explains further: "When things were said or sung within the native culture, explicit analysis—a detailed meta-language for dealing with form—was not needed. Performer and audience shared an implicit knowledge of language and ways of speaking." Papago autobiographer Maria Chona explains most succinctly: "The song is very short because we understand so much." In the oral tradition, context and text are one thing; Hymes writes: "The joy, the understanding, the language are all of a piece." The oral tradition assumes that, as deconstructionists would have it, both "producers [conveyers?] and

consumers of 'texts' (cultural artefacts) participate in the production of significations and meanings." Today, however, the Native American novelist's audience will likely consist of a heteroglot gathering, including tribal relations (who might be expected, for example, to know—to be immanent participants in—the Laguna and Navajo myths operative in Silko's *Ceremony* or the Blackfoot stories of Old Man and Old Woman important in James Welch's *Winter in the Blood*); Indian readers from the same or other tribal cultures who may not be familiar with the traditional elements essential to the work but who may recognize the coercive power of language to "bring into being"; and non-Indian readers who approach the novel with a completely alien set of assumptions and values.

"Every discourse," Bakhtin writes, "presupposes a special conception of the listener, of his apperceptive background and the degree of his responsiveness; it presupposes a specific distance."²⁸ For the Native American novelist, that presupposition is a complex conundrum. While writing for the Indian reader, the Indian novelist who desires publication must also write for the non-Indian. The relativity of specific distance becomes dizzying. Again, Bakhtin, though unaware of Native American writing nascent during his lifetime, has defined the predicament of the contemporary Native American writer rather neatly:

The more a poet is cut off from the social unity of his group [tribe, clan], the more likely he is to take into account the external demands of a particular reading public. Only a social group alien to the poet can determine his creative work from outside. One's own group needs no such external definition: It exists in the poet's voice, in the basic tone and intonations of that voice—whether the poet himself intends this or not.²⁹

The effect is a richly hybridized dialogue aimed at those few with privileged knowledge—the traditionally educated Indian reader—as well as those with claims to a privileged discourse—the Eurocentric reader. One effect of this hybridization is subversive: the American Indian writer places the Eurocentric reader on the outside, as "other," while the Indian reader (a comparatively small audience) is granted, for the first time, a privileged position. On the one hand, by consciously identifying her- or himself as "Indian" the writer seeks to establish a basis for authoritative, or externally persuasive, discourse; on the other hand, the writer must make that discourse internally persuasive for the non-Indian reader unaccustomed to

peripherality. At the same time, the writer is appropriating an essentially "other" language and thus entering into dialogue with the language itself. The result of this exquisite balancing act is a matrix of incredible heteroglossia and linguistic torsions and an intensely political situation.

For American Indian novelists, the "special conception of the reader" is obviously complicated, much more so than for mainstream American writers. While American modernists such as T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound chose to deliberately narrow their audiences via the obstacle course of extreme literacy—classical erudition and obscurantism—their work was nonetheless aimed at a remarkably homogeneous readership defined by the metropolitan center. The same can be said for mainstream postmodernist writers such as Donald Barthelme or Robert Coover, regardless of whatever levels of difficulty they propose for the conventional reader through their polysemous texts.³⁰ The same cannot be said, however, for Native American authors. Many novels by Indian authors involve difficulties common to traditional Native American literatures precisely because they depend upon those literatures so profoundly. As Karl Kroeber has written of traditional materials, Native American novels "are not so accessible; and most create doubts, difficulties, and frustrations for a serious reader trying to understand in depth, wishing to gain something more than a superficial, and therefore patronizing, 'appreciation' of Native American literary art." Readers who fail, for example, to bring at least some knowledge of traditional Chippewa trickster tales to the fiction of Gerald Vizenor—not to mention an openness to trickster discourse—are very apt to find themselves confused and perhaps appalled. Unaware of the crucial role of play and humor in Native American cultures, readers groomed by stoic stereotypes will miss much in Vizenor and most other Indian novelists.³¹ Likewise, as Alan Velie has pointed out, readers who do not have at least an inkling of poststructuralist theory may well be simply put off and confused by such Vizenoresque fantasies as the "Bioavaricious Regional Word Hospital."³² Of course Vizenor, who, in his rapid-fire approach to deconstruction, is fond of citing such theorists as Foucault, Lacan, Derrida, Roland Barthes, Bakhtin, Tzvetan Todorov, and Paul Ricoeur among a multitude of others,³³ has insisted that "some upsetting is necessary." In that spirit, Vizenor anticipates this somewhat narrow "apperceptive background" as essential to the dialogic of

his text and, rather like his modernist predecessors, agrees to the inevitable narrowing of audience for the sake of intensification of effect.

As of yet, literature by Native Americans has met with only begrudging and at best slight acceptance into the American canon. (The same, of course, could be said for ethnic literature as a whole in this country, and claims of Eurocentric-white-male-East Coast bias have also been made convincingly in support of literature from women and from the entire region of the American West.) More than any other particular segment of American literature, like the peoples who have produced it, Native American literature—whether materials from oral traditions or works by contemporary authors—has been routinely marginalized. One obvious reason for this exclusion may be the almost singularly urban nature of modernism, the sensibility and obsession dominant during the nascence of Native American written literature. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin suggest that New Criticism “had a profoundly negative impact” upon indigenous writers: “The assimilation of post-colonial writers into a ‘metropolitan’ tradition retarded consideration of their works within an appropriate cultural context, and so seriously militated against the development of a ‘native’ or indigenous theory.”³⁴ Modernism was “an art of cities” designed to “confront the psychological, sociological, technical, organizational, and political problems of massive urbanization.” While the local color movement of the nineteenth century and the “revolt from the village” that propelled itself into the early decades of twentieth-century American writing did focus attention upon the nonurban experience (in first romantic and later mostly negative, naturalistic fashion), this concern was at best a sideshow on the cultural midway of the American canon. In the New Critical and modernist context dominant through the first half of this century, Native American literature—almost always concerned primarily with rural existence and as far removed from the mechanical concerns of modern life as was possible—simply did not figure.³⁵ Simultaneously, traditional American Indian epistemology had little in common with the empiricism of the Enlightenment inheritance of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries or with the logical positivism that flowered along with high modernism. Thus, literature—oral or written—by Indians was, with the exception of a few individuals, such as Yvor

Winters at Stanford, universally shuffled aside into the realm of folklore and anthropological “local color” by literary professionals.

If we approach the concept of a literary canon with what Krupat and others have called “hermeneutical suspicion” and define the canon as “that body of texts which best performs in the sphere of culture the work of legitimating the prevailing social order,” the rationale behind the exclusion of minority texts, including especially Native American texts, should be even more apparent. The general absence of Native American texts from university English departments is further understandable if we consider Barbara Herrnstein Smith’s suggestion of the bifurcated aims of scholars:

The reasons for the general neglect and exile [of marginalized texts] . . . are more complex, reflecting among other things, the fact that literary studies in America, from the time of its inception as an institutionalized academic discipline, has been shaped by two conflicting and mutually compromising intellectual traditions and ideologies, namely . . . positivistic philological scholarship and humanistic pedagogy. That is, while professors of literature have sought to claim for their activities the rigor, objectivity, cognitive substantiality, and progress associated with science and the empirical disciplines, they have also attempted to remain faithful to the essentially conservative and didactic mission of humanistic studies: to honor and preserve the culture’s traditionally esteemed objects—in this case, its canonized texts—and to illuminate and transmit the traditional cultural values presumably embodied in them.³⁶

Native American literature lends itself to neither of these schizophrenic pursuits, being tainted according to the positivists’ light with the label of folkloric mysticism while failing utterly to reinforce traditional cultural values embodied in canonical texts. In short, the famous Vanishing American has always been in the best interests of this country’s “prevailing social order.” Works that both resuscitate the beleaguered and maltreated original inhabitant—who was supposed to have disappeared along with the passenger pigeon—and provide a countercontext to the national meta-narrative of westering and millennial materialism are not likely to be selected into the canonical tradition. As Roy Harvey Pearce has put it so well, “Studying the savage, trying to civilize him, destroying him, in the end they [European-American intelligentsia] had only studied themselves, strengthened their own civilization, and given those who were coming after them an enlarged certitude of another, even happier destiny—that manifest in the progress of American

civilization over all obstacles." The Indian's role in this millennial drama was supposed to be romantic, tragic, and epic, and as Bakhtin has written, "The epic and tragic hero is the hero who, by his very nature, must perish." The noble savage's refusal to perish throws a monkey wrench into the drama: "Outside his destiny, the epic and tragic hero is nothing; he is, therefore, a function of the plot fate assigns him; he cannot become the hero of another destiny or another plot." With few exceptions, American Indian novelists—examples of Indians who have repudiated their assigned plots—are in their fiction rejecting the American gothic with its haunted, guilt-burdened wilderness and doomed Native and emphatically making the Indian the hero of other destinies, other plots.³⁷

As everyone knows, it has never been in the vested interests of the literary establishment to embrace voices that undermine the monologic authority of hard-won civilization and challenge the traditional cultural values embodied in the accepted canon; American intellectuals have always preferred to look eastward, striving like Henry James's Christopher Newman to establish irreproachable bonds with the old world where values originate. (Recall how eager the "make-it-new" crowd was to go back to the "center" of colonial privilege, to relocate from the New World to the Old at the beginning of this century, and how, as Krupat has pointed out, amidst the literary fragments T. S. Eliot—the most visible "icon" of literacy in modernist art—busily shored against his and the Western world's spiritual and intellectual ruin in *The Waste Land* there is not a single American shard.³⁸ Recall also how late in American history it was before even mainstream American literature was allowed a place in hallowed halls.) Clifford, tracing this pattern of marginalization and erasure of the minority voice or identity in the Western world, suggests that this process "occurs whenever marginal peoples come into a historical or ethnographic space that has been defined by the Western imagination. 'Entering the modern world,' their distinct histories quickly vanish." Arguing more directly against this pattern of exclusion as it relates to the literary canon, Krupat writes: "For the canon of American literature, secular heterodoxy on an empirical level means something very specific: it means that any proposed canon of American literature that does not include more than merely occasional examples of the literatures produced by red and black people as well as white people—men and women, of indige-

nous and African, as well as European origins—is suspect on the very face of it." Krupat elaborates:

It is not simply that these texts should be read in the interest of fairness or simply because they are available; nor is it because they provide charming examples of "primitive" survivals: they should be read because of their abundant capacity to teach and delight. But for that capacity to be experienced and thus for the excellence of these texts to be acknowledged, it will be necessary . . . to recognize that what they teach frequently runs counter to the teaching of the Western tradition, and that the ways in which they delight is [*sic*] different from the ways in which the Western tradition has given pleasure.³⁹

Today, thanks in part to critics such as Foucault and Lyotard, marginalized literatures are moving onto the center screen of critical concerns. The exurban, suburban, and even rural subjects of a considerable body of postmodern fiction, such as that of Raymond Carver, and the rise since the sixties of a new and more comprehensive wave of environmental literature are also giving Native American literature a new currency. However, it is accurate, I think, to say that Native American writers have their reservations; they work for the most part consciously outside the concerns of postmodern theorists, at times working at odds with the aims of deconstructionist theory. The postmodern insistence upon the fragmented sense of self finds its reflection in the radically deracinated mixedblood of much Indian fiction—figures such as Abel in *House Made of Dawn*, Ephanie in *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows*, and many others—characters who truly find themselves between realities and wondering which world and which life might be theirs. In many cases, Indian protagonists resemble the typically displaced modernist figure who "finds himself in a situation he recognizes structurally as an inquiry into significance, but he is no longer sure what he is supposed to be looking for."⁴⁰ Repeatedly in Indian fiction, though, we are shown the possibility of recovering a centered sense of personal identity and significance.

It can be said of the protagonists in American Indian fiction that they suffer from alienation in the Marxist sense, for the self from which they are alienated is, in fact, shown to be potentially coherent and dependent upon a continuing and coherent cultural identity. While these characters may, like Abel in *House Made of Dawn* or the unnamed narrator in *Winter in the Blood*, suffer from something like "schizophrenia in the form of a rubble of distinct and unrelated

signifiers," their authors more often than not move them through narrative toward a "temporal unification of the past and future with the present" and, even more crucially, toward an ability to "unify the past, present and future of our own biographical experience or psychic life"—or toward a coherent personal identity entirely dependent upon a coherent cultural identity.⁴¹ Ultimately, whereas postmodernism celebrates the fragmentation and chaos of experience, literature by Native American authors tends to seek transcendence of such ephemerality and the recovery of "eternal and immutable" elements represented by a spiritual tradition that escapes historical fixation, that places humanity within a carefully, cyclically ordered cosmos and gives humankind irreducible responsibility for the maintenance of that delicate equilibrium. Such a generalization would seem at first glance to exclude a writer like Vizenor, who joyously embraces the writerly text and the chaos of play that inhabits the gap between signifier and signified, but a close examination of Vizenor's trickster discourse will easily discover an intense didacticism and insistence upon certain immutable values—precisely the aim of traditional trickster discourse. Thus, in Vizenor we may find something rather like the paradox of reform in naturalism.

In 1979, Michael Dorris, at that time professor of Native American studies at Dartmouth College, wrote that "there is no such thing as 'Native American literature,'" though it may yet, someday, come into being." One of the requisites for a Native American literature, Dorris suggested, was a reflection of "a shared consciousness, an inherently identifiable world-view."⁴² More than a decade later, it seems that there is indeed such a thing as Native American literature, and I would argue that it is found most clearly in novels written by Native Americans about the Native American experience. For, in spite of the fact that Indian authors write from very diverse tribal and cultural backgrounds, there is to a remarkable degree a shared consciousness and identifiable worldview reflected in novels by American Indian authors, a consciousness and worldview defined primarily by a quest for identity: What does it mean to be "Indian"—or mixedblood—in contemporary America? Michael Dorris, with his 1987 novel *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water*, has helped to define and expand this literature, introducing the first dual-minority protagonist in the person of Rayona, his half-Indian and half-African American protagonist.

There is no need here to belabor the long history of confusion,

theft, and genocide everyone associates with Euramerican and Indian relations from the beginning. Suffice it to say that the struggle for an "Indian" identity—and a long battle between competing discourses—began with a European error that, in the fifteenth century, placed the North American continent, and the several hundred distinct native cultures contained therein, along the banks of the Indus River in European imaginations. Since that initial moment of entanglement in the metanarrative of Western expansionism, the identity of American Indians—or Native Americans⁴³—has been ever subject to the psychic cravings and whims of the European colonizers. Kimberly W. Benston's definition of the "central crux of all black self-definitions" may apply also to the dilemma of self-determined identity for Native Americans: "how envision and name a people whose very existence was predicated upon expropriation of land, culture, and the binding imperatives and designations of what Ellison terms the 'familial past.'" Although Native Americans have lost far less of the "familial past" and self-defined identity than have African-Americans, in what Vizenor has called "word wars," stretching over almost half a millennium, Native Americans have fought an unending battle to affirm their own identities, to resist the metamorphoses insisted upon by European intruders and to hold to that certainty of self that is passed on through tribal traditions and oral literatures. Resisted most strongly has been the great Western myth of cultural extinction: the last Mohican stalked by the towering, epic shadow of Natty Bumppo westward into the sunset. Citing perhaps the most influential proponent of this myth in its enlightened version, Clifford declares:

In Lévi-Strauss's global vision—one widely shared today—authentic human differences are disintegrating, disappearing in an expansive commodity culture to become, at best, collectible "art" or "folklore." The great narrative of entropy and loss in *Triste tropiques* expresses an inescapable, sad truth. But it is too neat, and it assumes a questionable Eurocentric position at the "end" of a unified human history, gathering up, memorializing the world's local historicities.⁴⁴

Within this context of indigenous culture as vanishing, collectible commodity, the words of a popular guidebook for collectors of Indian "artifacts"—including ceremonial pipes and many other objects that have undoubtedly come from burial sites—offer American Indians a chilling insight. "It should be noted," the author of the guide admonishes, "that the listed value . . . is not an ultimate valuation. . . . Instead, it is judged by the possessor to be fair market

value." The author goes on to encourage collectors: "Don't be upset by what may seem to be high prices; don't feel that American Indian items are beyond your financial reach."⁴⁵ What, we are led to ask, is the "fair market value" of a sacred object, what might be the "ultimate valuation" of a culture? When might American Indian identity finally be beyond the "financial reach" of commodifiers?

To borrow Clifford's wonderfully descriptive phrase, novels by Native American authors might be thought of as "local narratives of cultural continuity and recovery."⁴⁶ That "great narrative of entropy and loss" which is the Euramerican version of Native American history since the fifteenth century is being revised and rewritten in contemporary Indian literature from an Indian perspective. The consciousness shared in all of these works is that of the individual attempting to reimagine an identity, to articulate a self within a Native American context.⁴⁷ And in every case the mixedblood turns at the point of division back toward an Indian identity and away from the collective dream of white America. In arguing for a distinct Native American literature, Lester A. Standiford has emphasized this repudiation of the so-called American Dream and simultaneously articulated useful distinguishing characteristics of American Indian literature on a broader scale, emphasizing points that will be taken up in the various readings of novels in my study. Standiford writes: "Because many Native Americans view the notion of 'Manifest Destiny' as a form of genocide that still threatens them today; because they share an Oriental view of man as a creature of equal spirit stature with all other things in the world, striving to maintain harmonious balance; because they hold fast to the traditional belief in the very real power of the word; and because they build on the influence of the oral literary tradition, with its symbolic density and intricate patterns of repetition, contemporary poetry and fiction by Indian Americans distinguishes itself from the so-called 'mainstream.'"⁴⁸

This study is a modest attempt to further introduce novels by American Indian authors to the wider audience they deserve and to make readers more aware that for fiction about Indians they can go directly to Indian authors rather than to the immense American library of fiction about Indians by Euramerican writers. Recently, Native American fiction has begun to attract attention partly because of the stunning popularity of novels by Chippewa writer Louise Erdrich. With award-winning and best-selling novels—*Love Medicine*, *The Beet Queen*, *Tracks*, and *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water*—

Erdrich and her husband/collaborator Michael Dorris have made East Coast publishers and readers aware of the fact that Native Americans can write, quite well, about themselves. Kiowa author N. Scott Momaday—riding the crest of 1960s enthusiasm for Indians and all things "earthy"—had made a critical beginning in this direction when, in 1969, he won a Pulitzer Prize for the brilliant novel *House Made of Dawn*. Here, critics discovered, was a novel that displayed the craft and ambitious complexity expected of the major writers of modernism, a work by an Indian author who brought formidable skills to bear upon the subject of Indians. Perhaps most importantly, with its blatant echoes of Faulkner, Hemingway, even Emily Dickinson, *House Made of Dawn* seemed to be a novel that lent itself rather nicely to the conventional tools of modernist critique—never mind the subtle complexities of Pueblo and Navajo elements in the novel.

Prior to *House Made of Dawn*, most fiction about American Indians had been written by non-Indian authors in a process that resembled literary colonization. In the early nineteenth century, James Fenimore Cooper's stoic savage had padded out of the eastern forests (and, as Pearce has shown, out of an already well established tradition of "savagism") squarely into American romanticism, and as naturalism began to darken the glass of American literature later in that century, Cooper's noble stoic was joined by his close relative, the even more doomed, even more rapidly vanishing Native American. In spite of his inspired belief that "we cannibals must help these Christians," Queequeg in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, upon whose coffin Ishmael surfaces and survives, represents one of the best-known examples of this doomed figure (as Erdrich subtly points out in *Love Medicine*). Mark Twain's tortured and torturing mixedblood, "Injun Joe," in *Tom Sawyer*, takes this cliché to the painful conclusion that would be seen again and again in American fiction and film all the way to Blue Duck, the pathological "breed" (a version of the conventional "renegade" of dime novels) in Larry McMurtry's 1987 novel, *Lonesome Dove*. In the twentieth century the modernists would delightedly appropriate the Indian as the quintessential naturalistic victim, and William Faulkner would add "Chief Doom" to the Vanishing American Hall of Fame, while the author and "Indian expert" Oliver LaFarge would reap great novelistic rewards with a Harvard anthropology student's filmy perspective on the Native American.⁴⁹

As with all colonization, the native is made over in this fiction to

reflect the psychic cravings of the colonialist—for the most part Indian characters in American fiction bear very little resemblance to the human beings who, whether living on reservations or in urban centers, identify with the many tribal cultures on this continent. Momaday, undoubtedly the best-known American Indian writer world-wide, takes a very broad view of this subject, saying, "I've read non-Indians who have written about Indian matters and done it very well, and of course that works the other way around, too. I've also read some things that were very bad because the writer was simply writing outside his experience."⁵⁰ However, the Native American writer, surveying what is surely a literary wasteland for the Indian, sees inexhaustible opportunity and need to "make it new."

Before 1968 only nine novels by American Indian authors had been published. The first was John Rollin Ridge's *Joaquin Murieta* in 1854, followed by Simon Pokagon's *Queen of the Woods* in 1899,⁵¹ Mourning Dove's *Cogewea, the Half-Blood* in 1927, three novels by the Cherokee writer John Milton Oskison in the 1920s and 1930s, John Joseph Mathews's *Sundown* in 1934, and D'Arcy McNickle's *The Surrounded* in 1936 and *Runner in the Sun* in 1954. However, as if Momaday had triggered a long-dormant need among Indian writers, the 1970s saw the publication of a stream of novels by Indian authors including Janet Campbell Hale, Nasnaga (Roger Russell), Chief George Pierre, Ted Williams, Dallas Chief Eagle, Hyemeyohsts Storm, Denton R. Bedford, James Welch, Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve, Gerald Vizenor, Charles Penoi, and Leslie Silko. The 1980s and '90s have added novels by Louise Erdrich, Michael Dorris, Paula Gunn Allen, Anna Walters, Tom King, Linda Hogan, Craig Strete, and myself as well as new works by Momaday, Vizenor, and Welch.

In more than a century of American Indian novels, an evolution has taken place in the way Indian writers approach their subjects and the way these novels fit into the mainstream of American literature. In the beginning, the mixedblood Cherokee author John Rollin Ridge felt obligated to disguise his outrage at America's genocidal treatment of his tribe, accomplishing this disguise by writing a novel masquerading as a biography of a California bandit. Nearly three-quarters of a century later, Mourning Dove wrote of the bitter sense of isolation and estrangement felt by the mixedblood in *Cogewea*. Somewhat problematic in its editing, *Cogewea* reflects the bittersweet, romantic atmosphere that surrounds the Indian in

much American literature. That romantic atmosphere begins to disappear from the Indian novel in the 1930s with the appearance of fiction by Mathews and McNickle. Writing of the nightmare time of new oil money and dissolution for the Osage, Mathews permeates his novel, *Sundown*, with a feeling of naturalistic despair as the protagonist, Chal Windzer, slips into the deracinated no-Indian's-land between Osage and white worlds. In spite of subtle invocation of sacred geography and patterns out of the oral tradition, both of which hint at continuity and survival, McNickle, like Mathews, reflects the grimness of the Hemingway era of naturalism in his first novel, *The Surrounded*. Like Chal Windzer, McNickle's protagonist Archilde Leon never has a chance within a civilization bent on turning Indians into Europeans.

The next generation of Indian novelists begins with Momaday, the spiritual father of today's Native American writers. And in *House Made of Dawn*, Momaday picks up where Mathews and McNickle leave off. Abel, the protagonist of Momaday's novel, is as alienated and fragmented as either Chal Windzer or Archilde Leon. Returned from the trauma of a white-man's war, Abel is dislocated from his cultural roots. He cannot articulate his identity as an Indian. However, in this novel Momaday takes the next crucial step for Indian writers: he brings Abel full circle, back home to his Southwestern pueblo and a secure knowledge of who he is. For Chal and Archilde there is no coherent world to return to, but Abel has his grandfather and the ancient home of his people. Though like his predecessors he focuses upon the agony of the Indian seemingly trapped between worlds, with this circular journey toward identity Momaday establishes a new pattern that will continue to inform Native American novels up to the present time. With Momaday, American Indian fiction becomes a kind of vision quest, with the writing reflecting the journey of its author toward a rich self-recognition as Indian (in Momaday's case, as specifically Kiowa). Momaday's writing illustrates a process of becoming, and demonstrates Bakhtin's contention that "one's own discourse is gradually and slowly wrought out of others' words that have been acknowledged and assimilated."⁵²

In his mixed-genre masterpiece, *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, Momaday illuminates brilliantly this process of self-articulation. James Welch reflects this new direction in *Winter in the Blood* (1974) when he allows his alienated protagonist a glimpse of the meaningful, ordered world of his ancestral Blackfeet and thus begins the healing process for his nameless narrator. In *The Death of Jim Loney* (1979),

Welch moves nearer the patterns of *Sundown* and *The Surrounded*, creating in Jim Loney a mixedblood trapped inexorably between identities and worlds. With a knowledge of his Indian heritage held tantalizingly just out of reach, Loney drifts toward his demise. With *Fools Crow* (1986), Welch completes his own act of recovery as he moves all the way back to the traditional Blackfoot world only glimpsed by the narrator of *Winter in the Blood*. In *Fools Crow*, Welch "re-members" his Blackfoot heritage and makes it whole and accessible. Simultaneously, though writing in English, Welch becomes the first author to grant privilege and authority to an Indian discourse by demanding that the reader adapt to, or assimilate, a Blackfoot world-view. Throughout the novel, the almost exclusively Blackfoot context as well as abundant literal translations of Blackfoot terms creates an unmistakable awareness of Indian language as what Bakhtin terms a "social language," or "a concrete socio-linguistic belief system that defines a distinct identity for itself. . . ." The result is, more obviously in *Fools Crow* than in any other novel by an Indian author, an unmistakable hybridization, or "a mixture of two social languages [Indian and Euroamerican English] within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses."⁵³ Thus *Fools Crow* becomes, in form as well as content, a powerfully political work, one that may herald a new confidence and new direction for Indian authors. In *The Indian Lawyer*, Welch's most recent novel (1990), the protagonist is a Native American caught up in the kind of sex-and-politics entanglement long familiar to soap-opera fans; here, though Indian elements permeate the novel, Welch's subject is primarily the common, domestic human drama rather than anything peculiarly "Indian."

Leslie Silko, in *Ceremony* (1977), writes again of a mixedblood protagonist lost between cultures and identities. However, in the character of Tayo, Silko turns the conventionally painful predicament of the mixedblood around, making the mixedblood a metaphor for the dynamic, syncretic, adaptive qualities of Indian cultures that will ensure survival. As she leads Tayo through a healing ceremony in mythic time, in a novel that becomes a ceremony for its reader, Silko makes it clear for the first time in American Indian literature that the mixedblood is a rich source of power and something to be celebrated rather than mourned. In *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart* (1978), Gerald Vizenor goes still further in his celebration of mixedbloods. Writing a postapocalyptic allegory, Vizenor

challenges those who would insist upon static definitions of the concept "Indian" or of anything else.⁵⁴ With the wild, satiric humor of *Bearheart* and his more recent novels—*Griever* (1987) and *The Trickster of Liberty* (1988)—Vizenor rejects entirely the conventional posture of mourning for the hapless mixedblood trapped between worlds, identifying the mixedblood with the shape-shifting visage of trickster, who requires that we reexamine, moment by moment, all definition and discourse.

Paula Gunn Allen, in *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows* (1983), and Janet Campbell Hale, in *The Jailing of Cecelia Capture* (1985), introduce the first novels since Mourning Dove's *Cogewea* to be both by and about American Indian women. Both of these novels feature mixedbloods at odds with surroundings and self, and both allow their protagonists to put the pieces of their identities back together through discoveries—in very different manner and degree—of their Indian selves. Louise Erdrich adds to this emerging body of fiction by Native American women with *Love Medicine* (1984), *The Beet Queen* (1986), and *Tracks* (1988), novels that move easily within the marginal zones where fullbloods, mixedbloods, and non-Indians meet and merge. With wry humor and an emphasis upon discontinuous and multiple narratives, Erdrich creates a fiction that is more familiar to non-Indian readers and critics than is much of the fiction of other Native American writers. Collectively, these first three books of a planned quartet constitute an ordering or putting together of a contemporary Chippewa identity. *Love Medicine*, with its numerous narrators and almost inextricably confused genealogies, bares the contemporary reservation world, where the rules of politics and survival seem to change daily. At the center of the novel is Lipsha Morrissey, the character circling gradually toward self-knowledge—knowledge that will come in the form of a traditional Chippewa trickster, Nanapush. In *The Beet Queen*, Erdrich shifts her focus to a small Dakota town inhabited primarily by Anglo-Americans, a place where the reservation is merely some kind of mute outback and Indians just another thread in the very bare fabric of society. *Tracks*, on the other hand, moves back in time to the generation preceding *Love Medicine* and *The Beet Queen* to show, primarily through the narration of another Nanapush-trickster, how the world of the two later novels came to be. In these novels, Erdrich goes beyond the long-established pattern of making cultural conflict and mixedblood angst the thematic center. Instead, she writes of the more universal trials of characters who just happen to

be Indian or Indian-and-white, setting the multiple minidramas against a recognizable Indian world.

Erdrich's husband and collaborator, Michael Dorris, follows a similar path in his first novel, *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water* (1987), using multiple narrators to triangulate in on the mixedblood identity of Rayona, a half-African American, half-Indian girl. Anna Walters opens up still a new region for Native American fiction with her 1988 novel, *Ghost Singer*, a book that weaves Navajo history and mythology into a story of "ghosts" and anthropological desecration. Walters picks up a thread from D'Arcy McNickle's posthumous 1976 novel, *Wind from an Enemy Sky*, and makes the violation of Indian "artifacts" central to her plot. She illustrates powerfully James Clifford's contention that "collecting—at least in the West, where time is generally thought to be linear and irreversible—implies a rescue of phenomena from inevitable historical decay or loss."⁵⁵ Simultaneously, Walters introduces a story of a Navajo woman's search for her identity, embedding that story in a grimmer tale of Navajo enslavement and mutilation. Though other Indian writers have dealt with the subject, Walters is the first novelist since McNickle to make the highly controversial appropriation of American Indian remains a central theme.⁵⁶ Most recently, Linda Hogan has taken up the thread of Mathews's Osage material in *Mean Spirit* (1990), writing of the dangerous times of oil money and murder among the Osage, while Tom King, in *Medicine River*, has shifted the ground of the Indian novel across the "medicine line" into Canada in a complex and very funny tale of mixedbloods and mixed lives.

American Indian novelists are revising fundamentally the long-cherished, static view of Indian lives and cultures (or noncultures) held by people around the world. Of Cooper's nineteenth-century fiction, Roy Harvey Pearce declared, "The interest is not in the Indian as Indian, but in the Indian as a vehicle for understanding the white man, in the savage defined in terms of the ideas and needs of civilized life." The same words might apply to most literature about Indians by non-Indian authors. In Native American fiction, for the first time, the interest is always and intensely in the Indian defined in terms of Indian ideas and needs as those have evolved into the late twentieth century. In contemporary literature, and, I would argue, the novel in particular, Native American writers are producing what Pearce longs for in his postscript to *Savagism and Civilization*: "a study of the Indian image of himself, a study of

the idea of Civilization as it at once has been introjected into the Indian psyche and helped to shape it."⁵⁷

The cardboard cliché that has trod stealthily through American literature from its inception has been replaced by Indian characters with the complexity, depth, and drama of characters we have been taught to think of as "real"—a distinction reserved usually for nonethnic characters in fiction. The "zone of consciousness," as Hugh Kenner might phrase it, or, to use Bakhtin's term, the *character zone*, is an Indian one, where the privileged utterance is refreshingly "other" for the non-Indian reader. The stoic, humorless, pancake-flat Indian of fiction and film has given way to a gallery of characters who can laugh at themselves and others, who are fully capable of cowardice as well as heroism, and whose lives can be every bit as tangled and messy as the worst scenario dreamed up by a John Updike or Eudora Welty. And, perhaps most significant, American Indian novelists have introduced to the world a new and ancient mythology. Just as the major figures of modernism—T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, et al.—demanded that readers know Greek and Roman mythology and the literary history of their western culture, Indian writers today have come to expect, even demand, that readers learn something about the mythology and literary (oral) history of Native Americans. Dell Hymes, writing about traditional Native American literatures, has expressed this point neatly, saying, "As with Beowulf and The Tale of Genji, the material requires some understanding of a way of life."⁵⁸

The wealth to be drawn from an understanding of *Ceremony*, *Bearheart*, or *Fools Crow* will remain always just out of reach to anyone who does not take the trouble to learn something about Navajo, Pueblo, Chippewa, or Blackfoot mythology and culture. And just as Eliot—looking forthrightly toward Europe—attempted to piece together the cultural and mythological resources needed in a time of deracination and despair, Native American writers are offering a way of looking at the world that is new to Western culture. It is a holistic, ecological perspective, one that places essential value upon the totality of existence, making humanity equal to all elements but superior to none and giving humankind crucial responsibility for the care of the world we inhabit. Vine Deloria, Jr., has stated, "In seeking the religious reality behind the American Indian tribal existence, Americans are in fact attempting to come to grips with the land that produced the Indian tribal cultures and their vision of community."⁵⁹ Simply put, as the world begins at last to confront the increas-

ingly unavoidable fact of ecological disaster, the Native American world view comes to make more and more sense.

In addition to some basic knowledge of the tribal histories and mythologies of the Indian cultures at the heart of these novels, readers should be aware of crucial moments in Native American history of the last two centuries. Such moments, or historical facts, figure prominently in writing by Indian authors and inform the actions and responses of characters within the works I will discuss in this study.

One of these disastrous moments for Native Americans was the Indian Removal Act of 1830, which stipulated that the tribes of the Southeast and what was then called the Old Northwest be moved to the wilderness west of the Mississippi River. When the Cherokee tribe, trying to avoid the loss of ancestral homelands, took its case for self-government to the U.S. Supreme Court under Chief Justice John Marshall and won the case, President Andrew Jackson's response was, "John Marshall has made his decision; let him enforce it." The Cherokees, along with the Choctaws, Chickasaws, Creeks, Seminoles, and other tribes were forced to relocate, a trauma including months in concentration camps and finally the long march of the Cherokee people that resulted in thousands of deaths and came to be called the "Trail of Tears."

A second historical catastrophe for the American Indian came with the General Allotment Act (Dawes Act) of 1887, an act designed to end traditional ways of life for Indian tribes by breaking communal tribal lands into individual allotments of 160 acres for each family head, 80 acres to single persons over eighteen and orphans under that age, and 40 acres to each tribal member under eighteen. Indians who accepted allotment or agreed to adopt "the habits of civilized life" were granted citizenship, something most native Americans would not enjoy until 1924. A key provision of the Dawes Act allowed the federal government to purchase "surplus" Indian lands—what was left over after all eligible individuals received their allotted shares. The major effect of allotment was to take land away from Indians so effectively that in the forty-five years following the Dawes Act's passage 90 million acres passed from Indian ownership.

Still another major trauma for Indian tribes in their relations with the federal government came in the form of the House Concurrent Resolution 108. Passed in 1953, this resolution stipulated that the policy of Congress was the unilateral termination of the trustee

relationship between the federal government and Indian tribes. The goal was to solve the centuries-old "Indian problem" by terminating tribes and thus forcing Indians to join the American mainstream. The result was catastrophic for a number of tribes that were thus "terminated," and the pressures brought to bear by the policy did not abate until the Kennedy administration in the sixties.

Other federal actions, such as the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, have continued to significantly affect Indian tribes up to the present. The most profound changes reflected in novels by Indian authors, however, have come about because of the movement of Indian people from rural reservations into urban cities. Spurred first by the heavy enlistment of Indian men in both world wars, this movement received greater momentum through the government's relocation program of the 1950s. With twenty-five thousand American Indians enlisting in World War II, the Indian veteran became a common sight in urban Indian gatherings and back on the reservations. Suffering the same kinds of trauma experienced by all soldiers at war, the Indian veterans had the added pains of discrimination and, more crucially, the eventual return to an Indian world where identity had been difficult for a long time. The results are seen in such characters as Abel in *House Made of Dawn*, Tayo and the other veterans in *Ceremony*, and Russell in *The Beet Queen*. Following the displacement initiated by the world wars, the relocation program—designed to move Indians from poor reservations to jobs and greater prosperity in the cities—helped to create a generation of displaced urban Indians, people like Benally in Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*.⁶⁰

All constructions must have boundaries—especially books, given publishers' understandable concern with textual dimensions. The result of such parameter-drawing is my reluctant exclusion from this study of a number of significant works. Among these are Paula Gunn Allen's *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows*, Janet Campbell Hale's *The Jailing of Cecelia Capture*, Tom King's *Medicine River*, and Anna Lee Walters' *Ghost Singer*—each of which represents a powerful, original voice in Native American fiction. Some works, such as Hogan's *Mean Spirit*, Welch's *The Indian Lawyer*, Vizenor's *The Heirs of Columbus*, and Erdrich and Dorris's *The Crown of Columbus*, simply appeared in print too late to be included. In selecting as I have, my goal has been to include works that serve to illustrate the beginnings and major evolutions in what I call the Native American Indian novel. The reader will find a complete list of novels by Native American writers in my bibliography at the end of this volume.